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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2359

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BANGKOK 000366

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR PREL PTER TH

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN THAILAND UPDATE: ROLE OF PARAMILITARY AND VILLAGE DEFENSE FORCE MILITIAS

REF: A. BANGKOK 00147 (MOSQUE SHOOTER TURNS SELF IN)

- 1B. 09 BANGKOK 3115 (RED RALLY PEACEFUL)
- 1C. 09 BANGKOK 2307 (NOT ALL VIOLENCE INSURGENTS)
- 1D. 09 BANGKOK 1508 (JUNE 8 MOSQUE ATTACK)
- 1E. 09 BANGKOK 233 (ROHINGYA BOAT PEOPLE)
- 1F. 08 BANGKOK 3094 (THAI - CAMBODIAN CLASH)
- 1G. 07 BANGKOK 1572 (SECTARIAN PASSIONS RISING)
- 1H. 05 BANGKOK 2541 (NATURE OF SOUTHERN TROUBLES)

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Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary: A variety of government, academic, and civil society contacts we engaged in Thailand's violence-affected southern provinces in late December presented consistent perceptions about the various paramilitary groups affiliated with military or interior/police structures and operating in Thailand's Deep South. The RTG has armed tens of thousands of people in such ad-hoc defense forces to augment the 15,000 police and 20,000 regular army troops assigned to the three southernmost provinces since the resumption of a higher level of violence in January 2004. Our interlocutors helped clarify the chains of command, reporting lines, duties, and funding for the government-sponsored groups in the southernmost three provinces and the effect they have on the security situation; it appears that the vast majority of militia members are Muslim. Locals told us they were able to easily differentiate between the various groups and hold them responsible or assign blame accordingly, based on their actions. One concern consistently highlighted was that the emergency decree and martial law governing security operations in the South confer immunity to formal security forces (army and police) and most of the paramilitaries.

12. (C) Comment: The Abhisit government did lift use of the emergency decree and martial law in four districts in Songkhla province in late 2009, in favor of invocation of the Internal Security Act (ISA), which provides for more accountability to both civilian officials and security force personnel. This move may be a harbinger for similar action in the three southernmost provinces. Since coming to office in December 2008, Prime Minister Abhisit and key advisers, such as PM Deputy Secretary General and Acting Government Spokesman Panitan Wattanayagorn, have suggested use of the ISA rather than the emergency decree and martial law would be

preferred in part to improve accountability and remove blanket immunity for actions taken by security forces. Not surprisingly, security forces have generally resisted this effort. End Summary and Comment.

A MULTIPLICITY OF MILITIAS AND SECURITY FORCES

¶ 13. (SBU) We made one of our regular visits to Thailand's southernmost provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Songkhla in late December to speak with academic, government, and civil society contacts about the southern security situation in general, with a particular focus on the array of paramilitary groups. Such organizations have long been a presence in Thailand's often sparsely-inhabited border regions, not just in the south near Malaysia but in the west near Burma, north near Laos, and east near Cambodia, usually drawing on local populations (and linguistic abilities) to augment formal military and police personnel.

¶ 14. (SBU) Our government, academic, and civil society contacts presented varying perceptions about the groups operating in Thailand's Deep South. While precise numbers of security forces vary depending on sources, most estimates are that roughly 20,000 regular Royal Thai Army (RTA) personnel and 15,000 Royal Thai police are augmented by 9-11,000 rangers under RTA authority and between 40-60,000 personnel in various village defense forces and other paramilitary organizations to provide security in the three southern provinces, which have a combined population of 2 million.

¶ 15. (SBU) Ordered from those closest to the RTA and most regularized Ministry of Interior (MOI) forces to the most loosely organized groups, the groups include: rangers

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(Thahaan Phraan); Volunteer Defense Corps (Or Sor); Village Defense Volunteers (Chor Ror Bor); and Village Protection Volunteers (Or Ror Bor). Other groups without official sanction by the central government, such as the Thais United (Ruam Thai) have been described as overgrown neighborhood watch schemes but have contributed guns and localized protection schemes (REF E).

¶ 16. (C) Some locals we talked to reported feeling strained by the presence of multiple armed groups and suggested a reduction in security-affiliated personnel would increase, not decrease, security. Students from the southernmost three provinces studying at Thaksin University in Songkhla and civil society advocates at the Working Group on Justice for Peace in Pattani separately told us that reducing the number of troops and militias patrolling the South would cause a significant decline in the tension and/or number of insurgent attacks, a view we had heard during our previous southern visit in August Hk
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Party of Thailand in the northeast, the rangers are a light infantry force comprised of volunteers but led by RTA regular officers; they are principally stationed along all of Thailand's borders. Rangers typically wear black fatigues and a colored bandana, similar to Boy Scouts. Outside of the South, rangers have recently been in the spotlight for their involvement in activities along the Cambodian border, including casualties suffered in skirmishes with Cambodian troops in 2008-09 (REF F), the return of a small number of Karen to Burma February 5, and participation in one recent anti-government rally (REF B). Since 2000, ranger units have reported directly to the RTA Army Area Commander to which they are assigned.

¶ 18. (SBU) Most of the 9,000-11,000 rangers in the South are 25-35 years old and undergo a 45-day training course upon induction, according to a contact in the RTA Directorate of Operations. According to Colonel Noppadon Uttanagool, Chief of Intelligence in the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) Fourth Region, about 70 percent of rangers in the

South are Muslim. Rangers salaries start at 12,900 baht (\$390) per month, compared to the 10,700 baht (\$325) base salary for RTA conscripts and non-commissioned soldiers, including combat pay, according to the RTA Supreme Command Finance Department and the Ranger Regiment in Songkhla.

¶ 9. (C) In the Deep South, the rangers had an overall poor reputation, according to several critics we talked to in December, in large part due to the participation of ranger units in the October 2004 incident at Tak Bai and a series of attacks 2007 against a mosque and several tea shops (REF G). Newspaper reports regularly mention the rangers as frequent targets of insurgent attacks. The Working Group on Justice for Peace and separately Abdulkarim Yeeekham, a Pattani provincial deputy district chief, claimed to us that many of the rangers were trouble-makers in their home villages.

OLD SCHOOL: VOLUNTEER DEFENSE CORPS (MOI-AFFILIATED)

¶ 10. (U) The oldest official paramilitary group in Thailand is the Volunteer Defense Corps (in Thai: Kong Asa Raksa Dindaen, or Or Sor), sometimes referred to as Village Scouts. Formed in 1954, the Volunteer Defense Corps (VDC) are armed, trained, and paid by the MOI and have approximately 20,000 members nationwide. VDC's principal responsibility is to protect infrastructure, facilities, and MOI officials. Provincial governors command VDC at the provincial level, while district chiefs have control of district-level units. Upon request by the RTA, VDC members in the southern provinces can participate in action under military command.

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¶ 11. (C) About 85 percent of all VDC are former RTA, according to Abdulkarim Yeeekham, and about 60 percent of them have college degrees. New VDC cadre undergo a 45-day training course conducted by the RTA and MOI, similar to ranger training. All VDC members participate in scheduled annual retraining exercises. Abdulkarim told us that the VDC are required to pass a physical exam twice a year. Benefits for VDC include four head-to-toe camouflage uniforms per year and a monthly salary between 4,200-7,000 baht (\$130-215) a month. Members are provided with M-16 or HK-33 assault rifles, which are kept at unit headquarters to avoid theft either at home or when members are off duty and in transit. VDC in the South are also eligible for an additional 2,500 baht (\$75) per month in danger pay and 800 baht (\$26) a month in per diem, according to Abdulkarim.

¶ 12. (C) There were between 4,000-4,500 active VDC in the three southernmost provinces, about 80 percent of whom were Muslim, according to Abdulkarim. Most VDC inductees were in their early twenties and joined after being discharged from the military, according to Abdulkarim. The MOI's 1954 Territorial Defense Volunteer's Act specifies who can serve (Thai citizens aged 17-60, in good health, and not active police/soldier); Narathiwat Vice Governor for Security Issues Niphon reconfirmed to us February 2 that authorities in practice choose those who are at least 21, having passed the conscription process (at age 20). The Chief of the Personnel Section at the MOI Bureau of Village Defense Corps told us in December that in practice they enlist people over the age of 20 because they were more mature and responsible. The same official said because there was no central database of VDC cadre, it was impossible to determine whether there were any VDC under the age of 18.

¶ 13. (C) Yala Governor Grisada Boonrach told us the VDC were disciplined and reliable, in large part because they receive a regular salary. Deputy District Chief Abdulkarim, who worked with VDC in his line of duty, claimed that the VDC were the most professional and had the best reputation in the South. Abdulkarim said there have been few disciplinary problems with the VDC, and it was a group many locals wanted to join; in Pattani, 7,000 people had applied for 200 open

VDC slots. The VDC were not universally venerated, however. A reporter for the Thai-language Daily News based in Hat Yai, alleged to us that many of the VDC had sold illicit drugs and moonlighted as hitmen.

MIDDLE GROUND: VILLAGE DEFENSE VOLUNTEERS (MOI)

¶14. (SBU) Also formally under the purview of the MOI are the Village Defense Volunteers (in Thai: Chut Raksa Khwam Plodphai Moobahn or Chor Ror Bor). The district chiefs, assisted by village heads, have titular responsibility for Village Defense Volunteer (VDV) units, with the mandate to protect their villages. In theory, they report to the local district chief; in the South, however, in practice they often fall under the command of the ISOC. Unlike VDC, VDV members are not paid individually; each VDV unit in the Deep South is given a monthly budget of 20,000 baht (\$660). VDV cadres receive between three and ten days of training by the RTA or Royal Thai Police, according to the MOI Bureau of Internal Security Affairs. VDV are also provided with two navy blue uniforms and two pair of combat boots a year, according to Abdulkarim. Each VDV village unit has between five and fifteen five-round shotguns, provided by ISOC. Members are authorized to carry the weapons only when they are on duty.

¶15. (C) VDV personnel numbered about 50,000 in the Deep South, according to an official at the MOI's Bureau of Internal Security, making them the largest government-sponsored militia in the region. Members are supposed to be no younger than 20 years old, but Narathiwat Vice-Governor Nipon indicated that there were some VDV as young as 18, often the result of sons who volunteered to fill a village quota in place of their fathers. The Working Group on Justice for Peace and Abdulkarim separately told us that most of the VDV in the South are Muslim, which helped

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minimize conflicts with villagers. Abdulkarim attributed the VDV's good reputation in part to the fact that they usually worked in their home villages. Lastly, the VDV are limited to patrolling from 8 p.m. to midnight.

PROBLEM CHILD: VILLAGE PROTECTION VOLUNTEERS (ROYAL-MIL)

¶16. (SBU) The most recently created, and problematic, militia is the Village Protection Volunteers (in Thai: Ratsadorn Asa Raksa Moobahn, or Or Ror Bor). In 2004, in response to multiple entreaties from Buddhist villagers seeking protection after the upsurge in violence, Queen Sirikit ordered the military to provide training for interested people. Deputy Royal Aide-de-Camp GEN Naphol Boonthap established the Village Protection Volunteers (VPV) and made arrangements to provide each village with shotguns. Members can purchase these shotguns at a 60 percent discount from the original cost, according to Nonviolence International's Southeast Asia report for 2009. Phinit Intharaksa, an assistant to GEN Naphol, told us that most of the weapons are loaned to VPV volunteers, who must purchase their own ammunition. VPV members attend a seven-day initiation training course conducted by the military and the MOI and are supposed to attend five-day refresher training courses twice a year.

¶17. (C) Each Village Protection Volunteer unit received a lump-sum payment each month, similar to the VDV. Funding comes from the military budget, as VPV units report to the local task force commanders, who then report to the Fourth Area Army Commander, according to Pattani deputy district chief Abdulkarim. The widely-held perception on the ground is that the VPV answers to GEN Naphol, with a secret budget from the military, according to the Daily News reporter who spoke with us. Nonviolence International's 2009 report stated that each VPV unit received 300,000 baht (\$9,900) a month. GEN Naphol's representative Phinit also told us that VPV

members were not individually compensated. Narathiwat Vice-Governor Niphon, however, claimed to us that VPV members each received 4,500 baht (\$150) per month. Abdulkarim also said that VPV members were given a monthly stipend.

¶18. (C) Phaisan Toyib, President of the Islamic Private School Association in Narathiwat, told us that of all the militias, the VPV were the most troublesome. Most notably, the June shooting at the Al Furqon Mosque in Narathiwat (REF D) was widely attributed to VPV members from a nearby village (NOTE: Thai authorities have arrested one suspect, an ex-ranger and VPV member, see REF A). Several of our interlocutors attributed this generally negative perception of the VPV to the exclusively Thai Buddhist composition of the VPV. The journalist from the Daily News said VPV members were most likely to view the insurgency as a religious issue, something he said was very frightening. He also claimed to us that most villagers associated the group with the Queen and not solely GEN Naphon; while this damaged the Queen's reputation in the South, it did not appear to affect local reverence for King Bhumibol, in his view.

UNOFFICIAL THORN: RUAM THAI (NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH?)

¶19. (SBU) An unofficial group not under RTG sponsorship known as Ruam Thai ("Thais United") started in 1982 in Narathiwat province as a neighborhood watch-type program, according to the Issara News Institute. In 2005, Ruam Thai instituted military-style training supervised by Police Colonel Phitak Iadkaew, then the chief of investigation in Yala Province, drawing attention from NGOs like the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and Nonviolence International, concerned about the age of some participants in the training. However, Phithak has not directly supervised the Ruam Thai since November 2007, when he was transferred to RTP Special Branch in Songkhla.

¶20. (C) Views on current Ruam Thai activity and numbers suggest that Phithak's transfer weakened Ruam Thai

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significantly. Governor of Yala Province Grisada Boonrach told us that since 2007, participation in Ruam Thai had dwindled to almost nothing in Yala, where Phitak was most active. Issara News Center's former editor Ayub Pathan told us that many previous Ruam Thai members had left the movement, preferring the paid positions with the VDC or VDV. Human Rights Watch-Thailand researcher Sunai Phasuk likewise indicated to us in late January that after Phitak's 2007 transfer, Ruam Thai went essentially dormant, and should not be considered at this point as anything more than a neighborhood watch-style organization.

PROSECUTING PARAMILITARY MISCONDUCT

¶21. (C) Pursuing accusations of misconduct or abuse by the various security forces in the South can be difficult. All of the official security forces and paramilitaries, except for the VPV, benefit from some protection from prosecution under the emergency decree and martial law. Rangers are considered official assistants to the regular army and are covered by the relevant clauses in the emergency decree and martial law in all their activities. Volunteer Defense Corps personnel are covered by the provisions in the emergency decree and martial law only when their activities are part of joint operations with the military and/or police; unilateral VDC operations are not covered by the law. Similarly, when Village Defense Volunteers are tasked by the military or police, they have the protection of the law. Village Protection Volunteers never have legal protection under the emergency decree or martial law. Many VPV members hold concurrent enrollment with the VDV, however, according to Abdulkarim Yeekham, making prosecution for misconduct difficult. Private, unofficial militias such as the Ruam

Thai have no immunity from prosecution for their activities.
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